

Finding Omega

By Pete Blackledge

Blackledge Urban Legends (BUL) abound regarding events surrounding my birth: That when my Father, who was returning from lengthy deployment absences during World War II, called my Mother to advise of when he would arrive home, Mother put my 5-year old brother Michael on the phone to say "Daddy, I want a little brother". That, although I was his fifth child, Dad was reportedly so ecstatic at my birth that the doctors asked if I were his first child. That, after siring three girls and a boy, my Father was so desirous of having another son that he immediately asked to see the physical proof of my maleness, and then — to the shock if not horror of all persons standing in the vicinity — hoisted me high in the air to publicly display and proclaim my manhood. That, having reluctantly acceded to my Mother's desire to name me "Timothy", Dad took advantage of my Mother's bedridden post-birth status to change that name on my birth certificate to his favorite name "Peter."

But one fact is incontrovertibly true: Much like the Biblical account of Jacob and his young son Joseph, my 51-year old Father absolutely delighted in this "child of his elder years." And although he was very busy with his high-profile position as Commanding Officer of Naval Ordnance Plant, Indianapolis (NOPI) , receiving such Navy luminaries as four-star Admiral Ingram and five-star Fleet Admiral Leahy, my Father — who had commanded thousands of Sailors and Marines during the war — never failed to rush home each night to spend time with me, carrying me around our back yard on his shoulders (Photo 1). Immediately following his retirement from the Navy, our family moved to Houston, Texas, where Dad became Vice President & General Manager of Cameron Iron Works.

As I grew up, my very close relationship with Dad continued; he was always exceptionally understanding and supportive despite my shortcomings. Although Dad had been an excellent athlete in high school and college, I unfortunately was the skinny kid who seemed to always be chosen last for our neighborhood sports teams. And whereas Dad was always gregarious and outgoing, I could often be painfully shy. Even when, like the Biblical "Prodigal Son", I went far astray, Dad never gave up on me — he always encouraged me. He often referred to the two of us as "The Alpha" and "The Omega" (he the Alpha progenitor, me the Omega last progeny).

When in 8th grade I asked Dad to buy me a set of weightlifting equipment for Christmas, he did — even though he was probably assuming that I would soon lose interest in it as I had with most other gifts and activities. But he had the faith in me to keep trying to help me find my spark and my direction. My father's confidence, and that gift, helped to turn my life around — as the scrawny, gangly, nonathletic kid (Photo 2) amazingly began to gain muscularity (Photo 3), prompting

Dad to start referring to me as "Little Abner, just 15 1/2 yar' old" (after the muscular comic strip teenager drawn by Al Capp). My increased strength and size from weightlifting, and the attendant athleticism which it brought me, surprisingly allowed me to even make my high school's basketball team and win my letter, and the resultant self confidence transformed me into being much more social and outgoing, causing me to become active in various social and academic organizations, even being elected to be an officer of my high school fraternity — all of which probably contributed to my being selected by President Lyndon Johnson for appointment to the U. S. Naval Academy.

Dad was elated that his youngest child would be attending his alma mater, and I was pleasantly surprised to have been accepted to the same college which my idolized and extraordinarily accomplished older brother had attended. Dad suggested that I would be a perfect fit for rowing crew at the Naval Academy. I knew nothing about crew, had never even seen a racing shell, and was concerned that I could not compete on a collegiate level —particularly at a top rowing college like the Naval Academy, which the year before I was to start there had won every event at the Intercollegiate Rowing Association (IRA) National Championships — but I was determined to go hard for it. So I tried out for the crew team at USNA, and was pleasantly surprised when I made First Boat on the Freshman Heavyweight Crew team and then again made First Boat on the Varsity Heavyweight Crew team. Dad was so happy and excited at my success, and became my biggest fan — even sending me encouraging telegrams before my races.

When he learned that I had won a spot to race in the IRA National Championships, he (at age 71) flew from Houston to Syracuse, New York to sit outside, in a driving rain storm, in the bleacher stands at Lake Onondaga to watch me race. When my boat decisively won our race (New York Times Article, Photo 4), Dad was standing right there, holding my Championship medal (Photo 5) in front of him, beaming with pride as the IRA photographers took our victory picture (Photo 6). Seeing him so happy multiplied my own exuberance. And when Sports Illustrated Magazine took our picture as my teammates and I completed the ceremonial dunking of our victorious coxswain in Lake Onondaga (Photo 7), Dad tracked down the Sports Illustrated photographer, obtained a copy of that picture, framed it, and proudly put it on his wall. It was such a gift to have Dad there at the end of my victorious race to share all the accolades, and to have him embrace me while I was experiencing the most extraordinary, euphoric high of my life.

As I subsequently began my career as a Naval Officer, Dad even came to visit me on my ships; our Naval careers provided one more unique bond between us. Although my career took me all over the country, and half way around the world, Dad and I always remained in close contact via phone calls, letters, and cassette tapes, as well as visits whenever possible. I enjoyed making our time together as memorable for him as he had for me, by always creating a special cake or other personalized item (Photo 8), and he laughed uproariously when in his 80s I

surprised him by hiring a stripper for his birthday celebration at the Blackledge Family Reunion!!!

In the year before Dad passed away, I flew to Houston to spend a full week with my then 85-year old father and to bring him a particularly special gift. Dad had always delighted in gifts which I made for him during my childhood Summer Camp days, remarking that gifts made by hand are particularly treasured as they come from the heart. And so I had researched the Navy ships in which Dad had served during his 34 year career, and wrote to the National Archives to obtain a picture of each. I then purchased, machined, and stained a large wood plaque, and mounted the pictures onto that plaque beneath a brass plate which I had engraved with the words "Captain Allan Blackledge, U.S. Navy, 34 Years Of Service With Honor and Distinction." Except when my Mother died, I had never seen Dad become emotional — but he did that day — and we tearfully but joyfully embraced. Neither one of us knew that would be the last time.

Dad subsequently entered the hospital for what was characterized as minor surgery. When his recovery from surgery became extended, my siblings and I arranged to fly to Texas to celebrate Christmas with him. Wanting to continue the tradition of my providing unique, personalized gifts for Dad during each of our visits, I made two particularly special presents for this occasion: (Gift #1) I purchased a small Christmas tree, as well as five large heart-shaped ornaments, and affixed a picture of each of the five siblings to the five heart ornaments. At the top of the tree, I placed an angel ornament that I made, onto which I had affixed a picture of Dad. (Photo 9). At the base of the tree, I placed a plaque which read "The Allan D. Blackledge Family (Christmas) Tree".

My hope was that Dad would be able to gaze at the tree from his hospital bed and be heartened as he felt pride and joy in the five accomplished and loving children he had raised. Additionally, I made a set of large angel wings and a halo for each of us five siblings to wear when we greeted Dad (Photo 10) to remind Dad of his often stated belief that the "Blackledge Angel" was always watching over us and protecting us; a belief which had seemed to be proven by the extraordinary good fortune of Dad and each member of our family; (Gift #2) I took my treasured Navy Varsity Rowing Team racing jersey from its honored position on the wall of my home, split it down the back, and sewed additional matching blue-and-gold material to its base, making a hospital gown nightshirt which Dad could proudly wear — as he had been so very proud of my becoming a member of the distinguished Naval Academy Varsity Heavyweight Crew Team.

But our time together was not to be. Only days before we Siblings were to arrive for our Christmas celebration, Dad suddenly passed away. I was absolutely devastated. Dad had been my rock. While my siblings had moved on to become spouses and parents, my primary identity remained as "My Father's Son." So I wanted to somehow create a special memorial for him. I knew that when a crew racing shell is

taken out of its rack to practice or race, the oarsmen call out the name of that shell as they lift it onto their shoulders to carry it to the water. What better memorial than to have Dad's name called out each day, at his beloved Naval Academy, in the sport which he had encouraged his youngest child to pursue — as oarsmen lift his named racing shell onto their shoulders just as he had once lifted me onto his shoulders?

So I asked my four wonderful siblings to join me in donating a racing shell to the Naval Academy in Dad's name, and all four graciously joined me in that donation. The Naval Academy held a special dedication and christening ceremony for the "CAPT ALLAN BLACKLEDGE" racing shell, complete with Naval Academy officials and photographers, in which all five of us Blackledge siblings participated (Photo 11). The USNA Varsity Heavyweight Crew subsequently rowed that shell to a decisive victory in the IRA National Championships. And at the end of its long, illustrious racing career, the CAPT ALLAN BLACKLEDGE racing shell was permanently mounted to the ceiling of the USNA Varsity Crew Banquet Hall, where it will continue to be honored in perpetuity.

And so was fulfilled the culmination of our precious bond, and Circle Of Life — as the Father lifts up and supports his Son, so does the Son his Father. Thank you Dad, my Father and my Alpha, for all you were and are, for all you gave to me — and for helping me to find my Omega.